

Human Resources

by Traci Moore

Lawrence Light had two degrees: business and theology. I liked the clean font he chose for his resume. At the interview, his face was open. His eyes were bright. Near tears, he pressed his palms together, said *You're saving my life*.

At first, he smiled often. Wore ties with pressed shirts. He shared a workspace the width of an elevator with two wisecracking, white-haired guys and a twentyish girl who hid behind her makeup. In ant-sized cubicles, they took calls from hostile people about insurance problems.

During lunch hour, while others split pizzas and told dirty jokes, Lawrence ate take-out Chinese and studied holy books in the courtyard.

One morning I heard him moaning at his desk. His skin looked grey. I called 911 and rushed to clear the alcove near the sink.

Paramedics smiled as if to calm us. Hooking up saline, sticking ECG contacts to his chest, they asked him for medical history. *Stopped smoking in March* he said. *Testicular cancer five years ago*.

After eight arms hoisted him onto a gurney and wheeled him off to the ambulance, I reviewed that scene for days.

Corporate Human Resources sent yellow daisies to the hospital. His elderly mother seemed confused on the phone. I typed up sick leave forms, pondering the doctor's note about his heart attack. Concerned employees asked questions the law forbade me to answer.

Weeks later, he marched in, grinning. Chest out. I.D. badge swinging from the strap around his neck. He took my hands in his and said *Thank. You*.

For a while there were chef salads instead of egg rolls. He saw a cardiologist twice. A psychologist every Tuesday. Some Fridays he even went to mid-day yoga. Ignoring the instructor's poses, he sat before the window on a purple mat, just breathing, his eyes closed against the sun.

Gradually, he started wearing rumpled shirts. He couldn't make quotas. The sighing, the squinting and the reading glasses he parked above his eyebrows made him look like a frazzled accountant. Most days, though the air conditioner cranked out arctic air, a mist of sweat settled on his forehead.

The wisecrackers said he had a hot temper and sought transfers to other departments. *Argumentative*, complained a client. An angry email he typed in ALL CAPS reached the HR Manager by mistake.

A Performance Improvement Plan was written, reviewed and discussed. Lawrence promised his boss *I'll change*.

But nine months after his heart attack, he sat in a cold conference room with two nervous-looking managers. I had five minutes to crouch on the floor of his cubicle and box up his kitty photos, bibles, blood pressure pills and fortune cookies.

The elevator doors opened on him standing up, sobbing. Together we walked to his black Infiniti. This gesture the HR Manager demanded, lest he "fall" and file a phony workers' comp claim.

Approaching his car, he turned to shake my hand. His palm felt soft. *God bless* he said, before lifting his box into the trunk.

There was a loud clunk when he slammed the trunk shut. I held my breath when the bumper bounced, just slightly, as he stepped in and drove away.

